



## Tony Visconti

**You'll find his output in everyone's record collection, yet this control room trailblazer is still doing it and still as enthusiastic as ever. ZENON SCHOEPE talks to him at Sun Studios about musical standards, the fear of commitment, and why recording is no great mystery.**

**IT'S DIFFICULT TO KNOW** where to start when introducing Tony Visconti as he's pretty much done it all. An American who came to England and cut his reputation in the studio business, he's a musician, arranger, producer, engineer, producer/engineer, and commercial studio owner who has worked with some of the biggest names — David Bowie and T.Rex are adequate credits although there are very many more. Most significantly the stuff he's done has become the stuff of legends and passed into the common book of verse for music recording — the progressively opening mics on Bowie's vocal for *Heroes*, the quick take nature of the Bolan singles, just how live was Thin Lizzy's *Live and Dangerous*...

What characterises his continued progress is the use of new technology, as and when it has become available, and a real solid sense of experimentation. He's still doing it. He's remixing Bowie back catalogue for multichannel yet he's still working with exciting current bands. We caught up with him on sessions with Denmark's best band Kashmir in Studio A at Copenhagen's superb Sun Studios.

### How did the sessions end up at Sun Studios?

The band has its rehearsal studio across the courtyard here and recorded much of their last album there and took it to London to mix [Eden Studios]. I met them last July and we did three days working out ideas together and seeing if we liked each other. I liked their last album and we'd done some transatlantic phone calls but you can't really get a feel for people like that. They took me across to see Sun Studios and I thought 'What is this, this is amazing!' I was really surprised when I came up here and saw all this wonderful equipment, a great room, all the daylight, it just had so many bonuses. I'm here for a month now and there's nothing wrong with anything! The microphone collection is legendary — if you go over to the mic cupboard you'll see mics that you've only ever seen pictures of.

We're doing the album here and we're going to New York to mix at my place. I wouldn't mind mixing here but they want to go to New York because it's important for them to raise their visibility with Sony America.

### What's the dynamic with a band like Kashmir that you've never met before, what are you looking for?

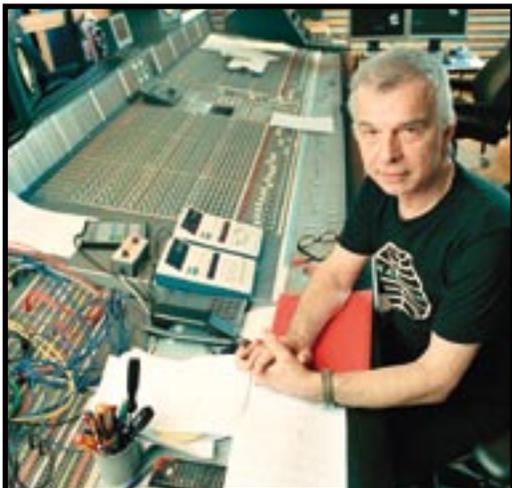
We have to know if we like each other and that's what the meeting in July was for. We not only rehearsed during the day, we went for meals at night and hung out socially. We wanted to work together. The distance was still a challenge for communication but we have the Internet now and I was getting weekly MP3s from them. I'd listen to it, I'd make comments, write back. Some of these songs have six versions of them. I would also give them encouragement as well as criticism. The relationship became an email one and we were doing preproduction via email. When I came here to do the album we planned to spend about a week in preproduction but we realised we had done so much MP3ing each other that we'd broken the back of it, so we came into the studio a few days earlier.

### How are you working?

Analogue desk and Pro Tools at 88.2 because it folds down to 44.1 nicely.

### What was the last analogue tape album you did?

Bowie's last two albums [*Heathen* and *Reality*] we started analogue with a romantic notion. It was good, the drums sounded really good on analogue. When I do go back to analogue, then it's just to record the drums and the bass because it's really charming, especially the low-end. You transfer it to high-definition digital and you don't lose it because you hit the analogue tape first. I've found that locking up



analogue with digital is almost as time consuming as the good old days when you'd lock up a slave reel. It's not instant, it's not always reliable so I'm really happy once we have the analogue part done to switch over to digital and stay there.

#### What's your ideal setup?

For tracking I'd go to 16-track analogue — I never did like 24-track. I started out 4-track, 8-track and it was always that multiple 4, 8, 16. With 24, it went funny because now you were dividing the tape into more slithers — kick drum and bass guitar never sounded right to me on 24-track — I'm a bass guitarist. I would end up recording the kick drum on two tracks to get some more width. When I occasionally went back to 16-track I would hear the sound I always loved. That was my golden T.Rex period, the early Bowie stuff, all 16-track. Even 8-track had something about it.

#### You started on 4-track and worked your way up, how have you seen the creativity change from those restrictive track counts to the virtually limitless track counts of today?

There are two arguments here for what is good and what's bad. With 16-track if you were going to do multiple backing vocals you had to plan ahead, you knew that eventually you needed 8 tracks for the two guys in the band that could sing and that you would bounce that down to two tracks or even one. That was planning, you had to think ahead. Therefore you kind of forced yourself into having a mental picture of the end product. Today, with the unlimited number of tracks, the end product is further and further away from reach. I have to discipline myself, I have to remember to think in the old analogue way. I know that it's a speedier way of working nowadays — much, much faster because I don't have to bounce anything down. Whereas I used to enjoy that, it was a bit of fun, make a little submix — sometimes you'd EQ, sometimes you'd pan between two tracks, sometimes add reverb — so when you put up those two channels a lot of work had already been done. I miss that, I really do.

#### Now you get to a mix and you've got a desk full of signals, it could be anything...

Then you have to be ruthless, then you have to start shaping, and mixing does take longer. In the good old days when it was 16 or 24-track I could mix two to three songs in a day because a lot of my submixing was done. The special effects were printed — the guitars had their reverbs. With T.Rex I'd sometimes

have five guitars that I had to bounce down to two tracks and I did a lot of work on that. The Beatles worked 4-track and when they'd come to the mix they probably put the four faders in a line and it mixed. Bowie came up with a good phrase: 'You discard the mire of options' when you do things like that. When you commit to a bounce down it's done, there's very little you can do to it then — you can make it brighter or duller but you can't change the levels.

#### Does that sort of approach contribute to your continued enjoyment of the music making process?

It does. I use Pro Tools with classic sensibilities. I see the end product all the time. I don't lose my way!

#### Have engineers without this approach influenced the way music sounds in a detrimental way?

I think what's more insidious is the fact that a lot of people who really don't play very well are making records.

Take Bowie again, we'd used 15 tracks and we had one track left for the vocal — I couldn't keep the vocals and I had to erase the previous vocal if we wanted to try it again. Now we have an infinite number of tracks so you just keep singing! In the old days people who were really great stepped up to the microphone and they could handle that situation, they had nerves of steel, they practiced, they trained, they were the cream of the crop. They made it up that mountain and they left all the wannabees behind.



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Nowadays the wannabees are making records. It's a terrible situation. With Autotune, with comping, 25-tracks of vocals, moving syllables around and all that. I can do it. I like to get a singer up there and my way is I coach them. I've been in sessions where a young engineer has said 'Oh, just sing a bunch and I'll comp it.' You know, even Kashmir were used to that and they didn't know any other way.

#### **Yet they're very much a live band...**

They are and that's why I took them on. I was convinced they could play and that we wouldn't have to do too much digital trickery. For them the digital trickery wasn't a substitute for lack of talent because they are very, very talented. These guys can play.

#### **So there are wannabees making records, engineers and producers working differently now, and musicians who are also record makers and engineers.**

That's another can of worms you've opened up. Everyone can afford a Pro Tools rig now or a Roland workstation and recording is no great mystery, just as picking up a guitar and learning six chords is no great mystery. But then there's that and there's Segovia — and the gap in between! I don't mind if a guy comes in and says 'I recorded my guitar last night, I was inspired at 3am and I just threw it into Pro Tools' and there's fuzz and hum on it but he felt great and natural when he did it. I'm all about performance; I'll take performance over engineering and technical mastery and I've always been like that. Look, I worked with T.Rex! I was so disciplined to get the sounds as fast as possible and a lot of them were take 1s to take 3s, it rarely went over take 6 on

anything. They were energetic grooves and I could see that keeping them in the studio for hours with the kick drum going continuously was not going to be productive with a band like that. There are some bands who love that, they'll take days to sound absolutely great. But recording is no great mystery.

Having said that I respect engineers like Geoff Emerick who, when forced to record a four-piece band on 4-track, did some balancing. You have to get the EQs right and your compression and you have to get four musicians on one or two tracks well balanced, almost like it's a final mix. Those guys are the Segovias, that's the Segovia level. They're masters and geniuses and there are too few of them now. I encourage young people to hire these engineers because you have a lot to learn from them.

When I record here I've got some preamps and I prefer to get a mic sound from three microphones and balance it and then eliminate the mire of options and get a great sound from three mics. I love doing that, I do it well and I don't want to lose that. A lot of engineers would rather have a stack of preamps and they'll put a mic in the preamp and take the output of that and put it into Pro Tools — no EQ, no compression. Now, my 13-year old daughter can do that with 5 minutes training. I don't see that as engineering, that's simple, it's too, too easy. Then they'll spend days balancing it all and they have the option to do that, to rebalance it and then EQ it. When I work with young guys and they see me do this they're horrified — 'But you can't change that!' I say 'I know! And I don't want to change it!' Every time I push those faders up I want the sound to knock you over, I want the band to be inspired, I don't want to have to be doing all this stuff and have the guys all sitting around. Nowadays a session is five

people watching one guy on a computer. There's no creativity in that.

I want to be able to push these faders up and within five minutes have a mix and have them come in and say I can't wait to do my vocal; that sounds fantastic.

#### You've been doing multichannel remixes of some Bowie albums, how much multichannel work have you done?

We've done David Live and Stage and we've just finished Young Americans. Heathen and Reality were done multichannel, then there's Electric Warrior. The multichannel world is not well served, all these got great reviews but you wouldn't even know where to find them in your record shop. I've also just done Born to Boogie the T.Rex film.

#### How are you approaching the live mixes?

Luckily I had the foresight 30 years ago to put up two mics over the theatre. You can feel the size of the room. There are a couple of other live albums, like Live and Dangerous with Thin Lizzy, that I wouldn't mind doing. I don't keep the band 'flat' at the front — I kind of wrap them around a little bit to get the experience of being enveloped. I use the centre channel very sparingly, I put a little bit of kick drum, bass guitar and vocal just to focus.

A studio album is different. For Young Americans I do put primary instruments in the rear speakers. You can put backing vocals, handclaps, sometimes a string section sounds very attractive in the back with the reverb coming to the front. The real rhythm section goes at the front coming around you and the vocalist stands in front of you. In the old days we'd ADT on the left and right channel and now I can put a little bit of that in the rear so you have like a triangle from a primary source.

#### You have the advantage of remixing work that you actually recorded, was it easy to get into it again?

Yes. I listen to the stereo and I remember what I'd done, some of it's printed and I recreate the stuff that wasn't. You can hear everything better [in multichannel] because if I take the string section and put it in the rear you'll hear the viola player sniff. I find multichannel easier. I think the sweet spot is less critical than in stereo and as you move around the room you can get a different perspective all the time. I really like that.

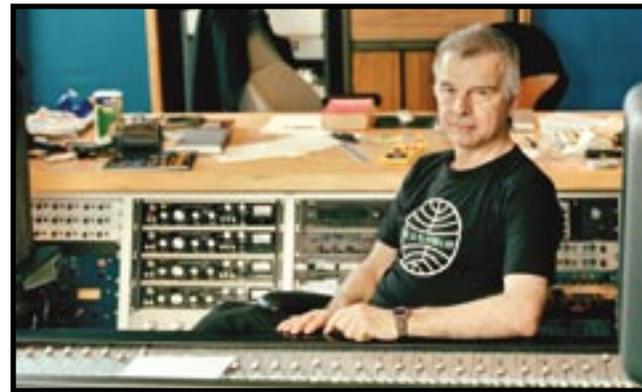
#### How much of the remixing for multichannel do you do on a board and how much happens in Pro Tools?

There are some things that are very easy on a digital board but really quick level changes, like if Bowie goes off mic for a little bit, I'll do in Pro Tools. I'll divide my effects — some of the plug-ins are so good these days, especially some of the reverbs — between plug-ins and external stuff about 50:50. I insist that if I'm doing something old I get a transfer at the highest resolution possible. Many of the tapes are not in very good nick now but we get them baked and then have about three goes across the heads.

#### Do you still enjoy what you do?

I love it! The fact I have a laptop — and I could master in that thing if I wanted to, burn CDs, play around, edit songs — to me it's a new lease of life. I like the idea of having both traditional studios and digital studios and carrying one in my briefcase on a plane. It's another way of working. When I was a

youngster I was always doing cutting edge stuff — I had the first Harmonizer in Europe, I had to have the first Eventide digital delay, I was always looking for the newest equipment if it did something that I couldn't do before. I had to have it. I'm still like that now. I thought about getting an analogue board [for my own studio] but I worked on the DM2000 and the sound was as warm. I spoke to Frank Filipetti and he said that in his experience once you hit the digital domain, stay in it. If you're going back and forth between analogue and digital then you're going to lose quality every time, no matter how much you try to preserve it with high definition. I tried that philosophy and I've been very, very pleased with the results. ■





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